

RADIO AND TELEVISION NEWS DIRECTORS FOUNDATION

# 2003 Local Television News Study of News Directors and the American Public



JOURNALISM ETHICS PROJECT

SUPPORTED BY FORD FOUNDATION

## Executive Summary

The Radio and Television News Directors Foundation's Journalism Ethics Project, and Bob Papper of Ball State University, carried out this study to look at the current state of local television news. This report is drawn from the results of two surveys conducted in January 2003: one of 1003 members of the U.S. general public, and one of 262 local television news directors. In addition, 2003 results are compared to two similar surveys conducted in 1998.

**1) Most people get their news from television, and they watch it more than they did in 1998. Television is the most trusted news medium.**

More than 8 in 10 people (81.4 percent) say they watch local television newscasts at least several times a week. TV also scores highest as the most trusted medium. Network TV news ranks first (30.8 percent), followed by local TV (24.3 percent). Newspapers dropped from first place in 1998 to third in 2003 (21.3 percent in 2003).

The general public identifies local TV as its major source of news (49.9 percent) by a far greater margin than in 1998—by a 2:1 margin over network news (23.2 percent) and nearly 4:1 over local newspapers (13.0 percent).

**2) Most people say the media, and local television in particular, are doing a good or excellent job overall.**

More than 6 in 10 people (60.9 percent) say the media are doing a good or excellent job covering the news. That's not as high as news directors rate the news (79.7 percent), but it's much higher than the news directors expected the general public to rate it (22.6 percent expected a rating of good or excellent).

The general public also thinks the news media are doing a better job today than in 1998 (an increase of

7.9 percentage points). News directors also think the media are doing a better job today than in 1998—also up 7.9 percentage points.

The general public rates the quality of local television news as essentially the same in 2003 as it did in 1998 (67.2 percent good or excellent in 2003 vs. 66.0 percent in 1998).

**3) Both the news directors and the public agree that local TV does not do a good job of explaining how stations decide what to put on the news.**

Both the public (56.4 percent fair or poor) and news directors (54.8 percent fair or poor) agree that television stations don't do a very good job of explaining how they decide what to put on the news. However, while over half the public (52.1 percent) say they want to know more about the process, over a quarter (26.0 percent) of news directors think the public isn't interested.

In fact, in the minds of the general public, explaining the journalistic process was one of the few areas in which local television news made virtually no progress at all from 1998.

**4) News directors overwhelmingly think they do a good job of responding to the public. The public isn't as enthusiastic.**

While 96.6 percent of news directors felt their station was responsive to viewer comments, ideas or problems, over three-quarters (75.8 percent) of the general public who tried to contact a station disagreed.

News directors overwhelmingly (95.4 percent) think they do a good job listening to the public. The public, however, isn't nearly so enthusiastic: Just 58.8 percent say that stations do a good job of listening to the public's concern.

Keep in mind that fewer than 1 in 5 (19.0 percent) of the public say that they have contacted or tried to contact a station about a story or problem.

**5) The public feels local television news falls short in some key areas. However, the public's perception is less negative than in 1998 for every area, with the largest gain in reporter's sensitivity to victims' pain.**

With regards to common criticisms of television news, a majority of respondents still feel that reporters don't ask the questions people really want answered, that reporters aren't sensitive enough to victims' pain, and that the news doesn't cover enough positive stories. Yet the general public's perception of local television news was less negative for every question than in 1998.

News directors clearly felt they had made significant strides in addressing the list of common criticisms of television news. As with the general public, news directors felt the biggest improvement came in sensitivity to the pain of victims (from 69.0 percent who said it was a problem in 1998, down to 46.3 percent in 2003).

**6) The public and news directors generally agree on the function of television news, with the public now feeling more strongly that stations should act as a watchdog.**

Most answers on the role or function of local television news were similar in 1998 and 2003—with one exception. The general public felt much more strongly in 2003 that local television news should act as a watchdog over local government; the proportion of those who strongly agree with that role rose from 29.0 percent in 1998 to 42.4 percent in 2003. News directors are still far more likely than the public to say that the media should be a watchdog over local government, with 76.6 percent strongly agreeing.

Answers to several other questions about the role or function of local television news were virtually identical from 1998 to 2003; informing people about the community and reporting the news even if it's shocking and painful, were cited as important roles. Most other function questions differed primarily in degree, ranging between "strongly agree" and "mildly agree."

**7) A significant minority of the public disagrees with the idea that stations should be able to broadcast freely without government approval. News directors say government officials have made some coverage a little more difficult since the events of September 11.**

More than 6 in 10 news directors (61.7 percent) think they're communicating the importance of the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech. However, a quarter (24.2 percent) of the general public disagrees that stations should be allowed to broadcast stories freely without government approval. Only a slim majority (53.4 percent) strongly agree that stations should be able to do so.

A majority of local news directors said official sources have made it harder or a little harder to cover some stories since Sept. 11, with 47.5 percent of news directors characterizing it as "a little harder," and 10.0 percent characterizing it as "a lot harder."

**8) News directors think they do a better job covering communities than the public does. The public is almost evenly split on whether the media are driven by making a profit or by serving the public interest.**

A slight majority (54.4 percent) of members of the public say local TV does a good or excellent job of providing information they need about their community and their lives. With 84.2 percent of news directors saying they do a good or excellent job, this finding is one of the top disconnects in the study.

Two-thirds of the public respondents (66.3 percent) agree that the news media have done a better job lately of reporting news in the community. Interestingly, the general public thinks reporters and anchors are more knowledgeable about the areas and subjects they report on than do news directors. Forty-five percent of the public characterize reporters as "very knowledgeable," while 41 percent of news directors cite that answer.

Only a slim plurality of the public respondents think local television news programs are mainly interested in serving the "public interest" rather than making a profit (44.7 percent vs. 42.8 percent). More people did select public interest than in 1998.

Both the public and news directors have at least some ambivalence about whether local television news should suggest solutions to local problems (32.4 percent of the general public and 25.3 percent of news directors disagree that local TV should suggest solutions).

**9) Although the public respondents think stations really care about getting the story right and respect their intelligence, they also think local TV chases sensational stories to attract an audience. Many news directors agree.**

Most members of the public (79.2 percent) think local stations really care about the news and getting stories right; and almost two-thirds (63.7 percent) think that television news reports respect their intelligence.

However, both groups agree (77.6 percent of the public and 53.2 percent of news directors) that stations chase sensational or promotable stories even if the news value is minimal. These numbers are up from 56.0 percent of the public in 1998, when they were asked a similar question.

Furthermore, almost 6 in 10 people (58.5 percent) think stations avoid stories that stations see as complex, boring or nonvisual, such as mental health and local government. More than 4 in 10 news directors (41.4 percent) agree.

In another potentially troublesome finding, more than half (55.9 percent) of the general public say they have become more skeptical about the accuracy of anything they hear in the news.

**10) The public continues to have concerns with the use of confidential sources, hidden cameras, and other controversial journalistic practices.**

The survey found some striking differences in philosophy between the general public and news directors. The public has concerns about confidential sources (only 20.2 percent say they believe most of what they hear from a confidential source.) Members of the public are dramatically less comfortable with hidden cameras than are news directors (78.5 percent of news directors think they should be able to use hidden cameras vs. 27.1 percent of the general public).

The general public is also much more likely than news directors to think local TV goes too far in disclosing the private lives of local public officials (38.1 percent vs. 7.7 percent), but a plurality (42.6 percent) of the public now says that the amount of disclosure of details of local public figures' private lives is just about right.

The survey found little change in the news directors' views on journalistic practices, including issues such as using hidden cameras and waiting until people are charged before reporting their names (24.5 percent say the media should be able to use the names of uncharged suspects). In both cases, news directors in 2003 are more likely to support the use of hidden cameras and early release of names than they were in 1998.

**11) Both the public and news directors see a significant amount of improper influence from news organizations' desire to make a profit, to get the story on the air first and to increase television ratings. News directors cite the impact of budget constraints on the quality of their newscasts as well.**

The general public thinks almost everybody improperly influences local television news. But in every case, fewer people felt that way in 2003 than in 1998.

Unlike the general public, television news directors do not feel they're improperly influenced by external institutions and pressures-except the three that relate to news itself:

-Although they differ in degree, both groups think the desire of the station to make a profit exerts undue influence on news coverage (82.0 percent of the public think it's a problem "often" or "sometimes" vs. 54.4 percent of news directors).

-A strong majority of both groups also agree that the desire to report the story first is "often" or "sometimes" a problem (84.0 percent of the public and 80.0 percent of news directors).

-Even more agree that the desire to increase ratings is "often" or "sometimes" a problem (84.6 percent of the public and 83.5 percent of news directors).

Additionally, more than 4 in 10 news directors (40.2 percent) called budget constraints "severe" or "serious," with 39.5 percent saying they had a "moderate" impact on the quality of their newscasts.

**12) What the public says it wants in a newscast and what news directors think the public wants differ significantly in several ways.**

News directors and the general public have similar answers about how they decide which newscast to watch, but the two groups differ significantly in describing what the general public wants in a newscast. A plurality (43.0 percent) of the public want their news to provide the "most thorough coverage"; nearly a third (31.1 percent) say they most want "live and breaking news," and 10.8 percent say they want the news they watch to be "first on the scene" (arguably a variant of live and breaking news).

A majority (51.7 percent) of news directors described their station as providing most thorough coverage; 23.8 percent said their station was most responsive to viewers, and only 10.7 percent of news directors said live and breaking news was a priority for their station. At just 6.8 percent, "most responsive" ranks lower for the public.

When asked to characterize the news that they would prefer to watch, a majority of both groups chose stations that do a "complete and thorough job" (53.0 percent for the public and 70.9 percent for news directors). However, 29.0 percent of the public want their news stations to "investigate and not be afraid to take on powerful people and businesses"; only 15.7 percent of news directors picked that option. Keep in mind respondents could only choose one answer for this question.

**13) And when it comes to changing channels-the public doesn't click away as much as news directors might fear.**

News directors clearly envision an audience clicking away during a newscast (77.8 percent think two or more times in a newscast). Nearly half (45.5 percent) of the general public say they don't change the channel at all.